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AUTHOR Hateley, B. J.
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ABSTRACT

This paper, written for counselors and educators, describes a course in guided autobiography (a self-narrative which is structured around important life themes such as family, work, health, love and death) and its role in developmental psychology. A description of the course which is structured around three components, lectures, writing assignments, and small group discussions, is provided. The lectures focus on psychological concepts and theories and literary techniques, tools, and styles. Weekly writing assignments focus on a specific theme through sensitizing, stimulating questions. Small group discussions, which take place the last hour of class, provide for reflection on the writing assignments through supportive feedback and self-analysis. The role of guided autobiography in developmental psychology, life metaphor, and life review, and the uses and adaptation of guided autobiography in a variety of settings are discussed. (BL)

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GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN APPROACH TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

by B. J. HATELEY

University of Southern California

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GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AN APPROACH TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Guided autobiography is a technique which Jim Birren and I have been working with for the past six years -- in our classes at USC, in workshops, and at professional meetings. Rather than writing one's life story as a continuous piece from earliest recollections to the present, our students write multiple life stories -- the stories that relate to various life themes. The themes include such topics as family, life-work, health, experiences with death, loves and hates, sexual development, etc. We liken our technique to the process of weaving a piece of cloth or a tapestry: one picks up one thread (theme) at a time, following it from beginning to end, noticing how it is interwoven with the other threads. As the process progresses we can see the texture, the variations in hue, and the patterns apparent in this "fabric of life" we are weaving.

Guided autobiography, then, is a self-narrative which is structured around a number of important themes. The themes guide the writing, provide focus, and break the life down into manageable parts. This is quite helpful for the majority of people, since writing one's life story can be a formidable task.

Our work with autobiography is also "guided" in the sense that the instructors and the small group discussion facilitators attempt to guide participants toward deeper levels of insight, self understanding, and personal integration. The title of our course is "Psychological Development Through Autobiography" and that is exactly what we try to promote. In addition to being

a useful tool for examining one's psychological development throughout one's past, guided autobiography is also helpful in promoting further psychological development in the present and the future. Exactly how this comes about will become apparent as I discuss some of the details of guided autobiography.

What I'd like to do in the time allotted is to give you some background concerning our classes and workshops, and then to demonstrate how autobiography in general, and guided autobiography in particular, pertain to the topic of this symposium. I will explore autobiography's contribution to developmental psychology, to the formulation of life metaphors, and to a broader application of the concept of life review. I will conclude with a summary discussion of the variety of uses and possible adaptations of the technique of guided autobiography.

STRUCTURE OF THE CLASS

Our guided autobiography classes and workshops have three equally important components: lectures, writing assignments, and small group discussions.

Lectures. Lectures are designed primarily to provide students with concepts and tools to use in analyzing their lives. Considerable attention is paid to various concepts of the self, theories of maturity and mental health, and a survey of major developmental theories. While much of the material on these topics is drawn from research findings in psychology, the lectures are enriched and enlivened with additional material from literature, philosophy, religion, history, popular culture, anthropology, sociology and other fields which take the human condition as their focus of study.

For instance, in the discussion of the developmental theories of Freud, Erikson, Levinson, Gould, Buhler, Peck, and others, we introduce Shakespeare's "Seven Stages of Man" as an early developmental theory.

Students are encouraged to critique these theories -- to test them against their own life experiences. Are these theories helpful to both women and men in understanding their lives? Do they apply to people from different cultures? How different are developmental patterns for people from lower, middle, and upper classes within the same culture?

The emphasis is consistent -- the goal is always to increase the individual's understanding of the flow of his/her own life. The central question is how the person came to be who he/she is today.

Lectures include a discussion of the history of autobiography, both as a literary genre and as an instrument by which the individual can come to terms with himself. The evolution of the self is traced through the centuries, beginning with ancient inscriptions of vanity in the Sixth Dynasty, up to the psychologically complex self-narratives of today. The self in relation to society, the self in relation to God, the self in relation to itself -- all have been understood in radically different ways at different points in history.

Of course, no class in autobiography would be complete without a discussion of writing techniques and literary style. Participants are urged not to be overly concerned with their writing style, for the goal here is not to turn out a literary masterpiece, but to promote personal insight. Participants write from the heart; they

write from the gut. Their own natural flow of thoughts onto paper captures vividly the tone and feel of their lives.

One of the most powerful pieces to come out of our classes was written by a middle-aged woman who had contracted polio in her early twenties and whose husband subsequently deserted her. All of her rage, despair, agony, and sense of betrayal were summed up in just five simple words: "He left me. That bastard." What more was there to say?

Lectures for the last few class sessions include the topics of life review, integration, fulfillment, reconciliation, life goals and the meaning of life, and prospects for personal change. This is the time for tying up the "loose ends" of life, for accepting life as it has been lived, for reconciling one's hopes with one's realities. It is a time for remembering things long forgotten and for accepting the previously unacceptable.

As the class draws to an end, participants are encouraged to wind up their "taking stock" efforts and to turn their attention to the future. The final topic is "where do you go from here?"

Writing Assignments. Each class session, participants are assigned a specific theme to write about for the next session. Sensitizing questions, or "pump primers," help trigger forgotten memories and stimulate recollections which yield a harvest of new insights into familiar events. Participants do not simply answer the list of questions -- they use the questions as jumping-off points into their own pasts. Some questions will be meaningful -- others may not.

The topics for each writing session are carefully ordered, beginning with fairly objective assignments, like "the branching

points in your life" -- leading into more sensitive topics like "sexual development" and "experiences with death." The final few topics are more up-beat, hopeful, and future-oriented, like "life goals and the meaning of your life experiences." The orchestration of the topics is important, since you don't want to start off the first day with a sensitive or highly-charged topic; nor do you want to leave participants on the final day with a heavy topic like death.

The list of topics has been refined and changed over the past six years, as experience has helped us sort out the most significant topics for people. Topics can also be varied to suit the needs and backgrounds of particular groups.

The writing process itself is crucial. It is through quiet reflective time, sorting through old memories and feelings, and organizing these thoughts on paper, that a great deal of integration takes place. Writing is part of the thinking process. Events take on a sense of direction. The writer can see how one thing led to another. Pieces, events, incidents fit together like a puzzle. The written product gives the life a tangible form. When finished, the writer can step back from his work, from his life, as it were, and look at it from a different angle. Things are put in clearer perspective.

Because of the importance of the writing process in achieving the goals of the course, we insist that everyone write. Participants are not permitted to simply <u>tell</u> their stories. This is not a class in oral history -- the goals and the methods are very different. It is great fun to talk about yourself, but it doesn't have the same effect as writing about yourself. Without writing, a significant amount of integration and new self-awareness would be lost.

Small Groups. A little over an hour at the end of each class session is devoted to small group discussion of the writing assignment for that day. Each group has five or six members; participants are assigned to each group so that there is a fairly even distribution by sex and by chronological age. Class members stay in the same groups to which they are assigned the first week; married couples and close friends are separated. A group facilitator is present in each group to provide support to the group and guidance to individual members in their journies into the past.

The small group interaction is the part of the whole auto-biographical process which participants enjoy the most. Each member has 10 to 15 minutes to read what he/she has written about the theme and to discuss new insights, questions, revelations, problems, while getting feedback from the other members of the group. The tone is warm, supportive, affirming, and very intimate. Bonding within the small groups occurs quickly, as people are drawn close to one another through the sharing of private and often sensitive memories. The group members help each other in their self-analysis by sometimes asking gently probing questions, or by offering a different perspective or interpretation.

Essentially what is happening is that members of the group are each placing pieces of their lives on the table for the others to share. There is no trace of evaluation, criticism or judgment. Individuals respect the integrity of each life as it has been lived and respond to each story with care, concern and compassion.

It is through the sharing of life stories that both the

uniqueness and the similarities in human lives are apprehended. Individuals see how their life stories are different from everyone else's -- that the configuration of events is unique for each person, shaping them into distinct characters. No two lives will ever be alike. Yet at the same time, people see that they are united by the common bonds of humanity. They have all experienced pain and sorrow, ecstasy and delight, tragedy and triumph, love and loss. They are at once different from and similar to each other. With members from different decades in each small group, the sharing of life narratives is a tremendous source of intergenerational understanding.

All three parts, then, of the autobiographical experience -- the lectures, the writing, and the sharing in small groups -- are important for achieving the goals of the course. The lectures provide new concepts, ideas, and tools which the individual may use in exploring his/her life story; the writing contributes greatly to the integration of life events; and the sharing provides further possibilities for insight and fresh perspective.

GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY, LIFE METAPHOR, AND LIFE REVIEW

These features of guided autobiography also enhance understanding of the self in several ways which are directly relevant to the topic of this symposium, "Metaphors of the Self: Autobiography and Aging."

1. Autobiography in various forms is both the source and the testing ground for theories of human development.

2. Autobiography is fruitful in the discernment and analysis of life metaphors.

3. Autobiography expands the applicability of the notion of life review.

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to discussion of these ideas.

Autobiography and Theories of Human Development

Else Frenkel-Brunswick[1] started her pioneering work in life-span psychological development with 400 biographies, supplemented by letters, diaries, and other personal documents. In addition, in order to study living persons on whom no biographies were available, she conducted intensive life history interviews. This wealth of data was used to compile an inventory of the individuals concerning: (a) the external events of life, (b) their internal reactions to these events, (c) the objective accomplishments and productions of these people. She was able to formulate hypotheses and generalizations concerning life-long psychological trends, and she was able to postulate five major life stages based upon these biographical and autobiographical narratives.

Daniel Levinson's widely respected work on The Seasons of a Man's Life[2] and Roger Gould's Transformations[3] grew out of life history interviews, as did Gail Sheehy's popularized version, Passages.[4] While these researchers did not draw upon already written autobiographies, the data that they compiled is not unlike that which might be collected with our guided autobiography assignments. These life history narratives provided the raw data from which generalizations about adult psychological and social development were abstracted. Anecdotal evidence in the form of recollections of specific life events is used to illustrate each

life stage and transition or crisis point.

In a similar manner, psychoanalytic theories like those of Freud[5] and Eric Berne[6] are derived from life histories recorded in the clinical setting. In many cases, the patient's personal documents (letters, diaries, etc.) have aided in the diagnosis of the patient, as well as in the further development and refinement of psychoanalytic theory.

Lawrence Wrightsman,[7] an enthusiastic proponent of the use of personal documents in psychological research, cites autobiographies, letters, and diaries in his formulation and support of a dialectic theory of psychological development. According to Wrightsman, letters and diaries are especially important, since they provide longitudinal data within which one can more clearly ascertain the kinds of changes going on in an individual, and the direction of those changes.

Autobiographies, life history interviews, clinical case studies, journals, diaries, and letters, then, are all forms of self-narratives which have been used in the formulation of widely accepted theories of psychological development. Stage theories, task theories, need theories, psychoanalytic and life script theories, dialectic theories, to name just a few of the major schools of thought, have used autobiographical materials as an important source for theory construction.

The test of the validity of these theories likewise involves extensive use of life history narratives. Erikson, Freud, Maslow, Sheehy and many others have gained wide popular acceptance because people have tested these theories against their own life experiences.

Theories help individuals conceptualize, understand, and explain how their lives have unfolded. Theories are modified and refined as they are repeatedly tested against the raw data of real life.

This is exactly what we urge our students to do in our guided autobiography classes. An array of developmental theories is presented and students are urged to test them. Are these theories helpful in understanding the flow of life? Each participant is encouraged to critique theories for their applicability and universality.

The same procedure can be used in analyzing other people's autobiographies, especially those from past decades and centuries. For their research papers, some of our students elect to study an autobiography in terms of a major developmental theory. The results have been fascinating.

The dual function of autobiography in the development and refinement, testing and critique of psychological theories should encourage further use of personal documents in psychological research. Such qualitative data can make a major contribution in understanding how character or personality is formed, how lives evolve, and how the tension between stability and change is maintained within the individual.

Autobiography and Metaphor

From the first day of class we start talking about metaphor: the first assignment is to "describe your life as a branching tree." What have been the branching points, where your life took off in a new direction? Participants are often quite imaginative with this metaphor. One young Japanese American woman described how her parents tried to carefully cultivate and control her to become a

beautiful little Bonsai; but her personality proved too strong and she grew up a wild, wind-blown, undisciplined Japanese pine. This same young woman poignantly described the pain of growing up a Japanese pine surrounded by tall, willowy, graceful California palms (*the stereotypical California girls*).

Another participant took an internal look at her life as a tree, referring to the growth rings in the cross-section of her tree trunk as "rings of pain" in her life. Her tough outer bark of defense mechanisms protects the tender growing tree within.

Other participants have substituted their own metaphors in place of the tree. Some feel that their life has been like a river, fed by many tributaries, meandering in different directions at various points, sometimes deep and quiet, sometimes crashing over rapids. Boulders and other obstacles have blocked the smooth flow of these life rivers, forcing them to cut a new path around the obstacle, or to go over or under. The river can be placid or violent, free-flowing or dammed-up -- it can cut a deep, narrow path, or a wide meandering one. For many people the river seems to capture the sense of the flow of life better than the tree metaphor.

Individuals conceptualize their lives with many different metaphors. One woman said her life was more like crabgrass -- it starts with a small plant, grows larger, then sends out shoots in different directions, which in turn take root and send out still more shoots. Life to her seems like a hardy groundcover.

Another woman said she was like the chambered nautilus, with the animal always growing and building upon a foundation of previous

growth. At specific points, the growth of a certain phase is finished, and the animal seals off the chamber, and begins a new one. The shape is circular, spiralling ever-larger, with distinct chambers, each new one beginning where the previous one ended. This is a popular metaphor for women, who seem to have a more organic and less linear view of their life's development than many men.

Yet another metaphor which is enthusiastically adopted by some is that of metamorphosis -- of taking on different incarnations at different times in life. The caterpillar-cocoon-butterfly seems to express the freedom, grace, and beauty that maturity can bring.

With guided autobiography, different metaphors can be used for individual life themes, rather than one dominant metaphor for the whole of life. For "health and body image" one man described his body as an automobile. He said he fantasized about himself being a sleek Jaguar XKE, a lean and powerful machine with a throbbing engine under the hood. His fantasy body was agile and responsive, always at peak performance. In reality, however, this individual said his body was more like a middle-aged Ford, with some dents and scrapes here and there. He hadn't maintained it as he should have -- feeding it inferior fuel, not keeping it tuned or in the best of repair. But all-in-all, it was a pretty reliable old body/car -- it got him around without too many breakdowns, and he had developed a lot of affection for the old Ford.

We encourage our students to experiment with various metaphors, to play with analogies, to break out of the usual ways in which

they think about themselves. The metaphor can provide a new understanding of the self, a different perspective on one's life.

Guided Autobiography and Life Review

Robert Butler[8] has postulated "the universal occurence in older people of an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one's life." This process is "characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated." Butler asserts that "the more intensive the unresolved life conflicts, the more work remains to be accomplished toward integration." The process holds potential for personality reorganization, as "reconsideration of previous experiences and their meanings occurs, often with concomitant revised or expanded understanding. Such reorganization of past experience may provide a more valid picture, giving new and significant meanings to one's life ..."

What our work with guided autobiography has demonstrated is that the process of life review is by no means limited only to persons of advanced age or persons who are facing imminent death. Butler alludes to this fact when he concedes that "Reviewing one's life, then, may be a general response to crises of various types, of which imminent death seems to be one instance."

He goes a bit further when he says: "Of course, people of all ages review their past at various times; they look back to comprehend the forces and experiences that have shaped their lives. ... One tends to consider the past most when prompted by current problems and crises."

Based on our work of the past six years, I would postulate that the concept of life review needs to be expanded. The urge to "take stock" of one's life is not limited to any particular age group. On the contrary, the retrospective impulse can occur at a very early age and again any number of times during an individual's life. Life review can be fruitful not only in times of "crisis" (a la Butler) but at other times as well. Many things can trigger the life review -- a change in lifestyle, a significant transition or turning point -- career changes, births, deaths, weddings, graduations, divorces, etc. Significant holidays or certain birthdays which signify a change in personal status (Sweet 16, coming of age at 18 or 21, turning 30, or 40, or 65, or any other "special" age). Any event which disrupts the normal routine of day to day life can cause the individual to engage in a life review. The review may last only a short period of time or it may continue for a number of months, or even longer depending on the nature of the event, the intensity of its significance, and the person's overall level of self-awareness and life satisfaction.

The people who fill our autobiography classes and workshops range in age from early 20's to mid-80's. Each age seems to hold its own unique impetus for engaging in life review.

Young people often feel the need to assess where they've been before they decide where they're going, as they prepare to launch into new worlds of college, career, marriage, or family.

Middle-aged people spend a lot of time assessing themselves, their careers, their relationships and families, and their value systems, as they go through various forms of mid-life transitions

and "crises." Children leaving home, career changes, strained marital relationships, disillusionment with current goals and lifestyles -- all prompt the middle-aged person into looking back at where he or she has been, before setting new directions for the future years.

Older persons go through their own transitions as they finish careers and relinquish previous roles. Theirs is the task of reviewing decades of experience, integrating often discontinuous life events, and finding meaning in existence. They need to find that all those years, and all that experience add up to something -- a total person. They must find significance -- life must MEAN something.

Butler indicates that "the life review mechanism (is) a possible response to the biological and psychological fact of death." I would expand this to say that life review is a response to many kinds of "death" -- the death of one's childhood, one's innocence, one's days of carefree play, etc. A separation or divorce is certainly a kind of death. And many other events -- a career change, a geographical move, an alteration in lifestyle -- all involve loss, or "death."

The reasons that people give when they sign up for an autobiography class support this idea. Most are going through some kind of transition in life; many are seeking new direction and exploring potentials for personal change. They are very often in the process of "letting go" of previous relationships, roles, friends, values and homes. Through guided autobiography, which is a form of life review, many are able to accomplish their letting go, and then turn to embrace the future.

USES AND ADAPTATIONS OF GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

People have a variety of reasons for signing up for an autobiography class or for writing their autobiography on their own. Some have a desire to "leave their lives" someplace, to deposit themselves. One particular man in Florida wrote his life story in his later years and when he was finished, couldn't decide to whom he would give the manuscript. There were many aspects of his life which he did not want to share with his children or his friends, but he needed to leave his life someplace. After deliberating for a few months, he packaged up his manuscript and sent it out to the Andrus Gerontology Center at USC, with the request that we keep it in our library for future research. Clearly, he had a strong desire to deposit his life with someone.

Some people write out of a need for confession, either to God or to a society to which they feel accountable. The writing of an autobiographical confession can be a cathartic experience for the individual, releasing pent-up tension and guilt.

Other people write out of self-defense, or the need for personal justification. These people feel unjustly accused of some transgression. For some, autobiography is an exercise in special pleading. They seek to demonstrate the mitigating circumstances affecting their personal responsibility for the conduct of their lives.

Many people are self-analyzers who seek to understand and explain the dynamics of their own psyches. Some write out of a desire for order -- they see life as a giant closet which needs

to be sorted out, with the contents placed in proper compartments. People often seek a personal perspective, an integrated overview of the past decades.

In reality, the autobiographer's motives are always mixed. One usually has several reasons for undertaking the time-consuming task of writing a life history.

The uses of these autobiographies are as varied as the reasons for which people write them. As I outlined earlier in this paper, autobiography has contributed to the field of psychology in the development of theories of personality and human development. Within the therapeutic situation, autobiography aids in the diagnosis and treatment of problems. It can help the client prepare for counseling sessions, giving him "homework" to do. Autobiography can provide direct therapeutic benefits to the client, most notably in heightening self-esteem.

In historical research, autobiographies can make history alive and personal, enlivening the commonplace details of life. One historian at USC has been teaching a popular undergraduate course entitled "History Through Representative Lives," using those life histories which chronicle certain eras.

For posterity, autobiographies provide a sense of intergenerational continuity. Especially in recent years we find people reading the life stories of their forbearers in search of roots, tradition, and heritage.

Guided autobiography, as a special form of life history writing, has further uses and possible adaptations of special concern to psychologists and gerontologists.

As I elaborated at some length, writing one's autobiography can be especially helpful to people in times of transition. It aids in sorting out what events and personal characteristics led to the present transitional time, as well as clarifying possibilities and potentials for the future. It can be used as an adjunct to therapy or can be a self-help tool for persons who do not feel distressed enough to seek professional counseling, but who may be experienceing vague feelings of restlessness, uncertainty, and the awareness of changes going on their lives. Such people may use the technique of guided autobiography on their own or with a small group of friends who are also working through life transitions.

Guided autobiography teachniques, most notably the sensitizing questions, can be used by younger family members who wish to interview older ones about their lives in order to document family genealogy, traditions, heritage and customs. More importantly, the subjective emphasis of the technique, the probing for internal reactions and feelings concerning life events can give family members a whole new perspective on the oldster who is the focus of the stories. As one young woman told me after using our sensitizing questions,"You know, we always knew the things that had happened to Grandma; but now we know WHO SHE IS." The technique captures individual perceptions and interpretations, not just the objective events.

Guided autobiography can be used to interview older people who cannot write their own life stories becuase of incapacitation, such as blindness or the inability to write. I know of one former student of ours who has been hired by families to interview and write the life stories of older family members.

John Hart,[9] a social worker in Los Angeles, has devised an interview schedule to be used with terminally ill patients in the hospital. He reports the beneficial results: patients have some "work" to look forward to each day and have a sense of leaving behind a life story which may be of interest to family or to researchers; the nursing staff have a positive activity to alleviate the sometimes depressing aspects of caring for patients who are dying; the family is the grateful recipient of a personal, familial written legacy, a meaningful inheritance.

Former students in our guided autobiography classes continue to adapt the technique to their own purposes -- in teaching, research, social work, counseling.

Autobiography groups are being conducted in senior adult programs in community colleges and in senior centers across the country.

Some freshmen writing classes at USC are using guided autobiography to stimulate the creative juices of an often reluctant captive audience. What could be more fun for students to write about than themselves?

Interest in guided autobiography from the religious community is growing rapidly. Each year, a number of clergy and nuns enroll in our course and have adapted the technique to their own counseling, teaching and ministry. The technique holds great promise for use in church retreat settings, for new member classes, for pastoral counseling, for personal growth and Christian psychology classes, and for work with groups of older parishioners.

The potential possibilities for guided autobiography are just beginning to be explored. The technique seems infinitely adaptable to special needs of individuals and groups from many different

backgrounds and with many different interests.

Guided autobiography can be used with the young, middle-aged, or old -- individually or in groups -- both age homogeneous or age heterogeneous. It can adopt a spiritual or religious emphasis, or can be dealt with in a purely secular style. Autobiography classes can be offered in psychology as well as in English, creative writing, anthropology, religion, or a multitude of other disciplines.

For exploring and understanding the dynamics of human development from both a theoretical and an experiential perspective, guided autobiography is unsurpassed.

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